WHERE THE HEART IS

For homeless children, schools that reach out to the family can be a touchstone of stability

KATHLEEN VAIL
PHOTOS BY MICHELE SABATIER

Matthew Cardinale never gave up. The vision of graduating from high school and going to college sustained him even when he had no idea where he would sleep at night. When he lived behind a Publix supermarket. When his time ran out at the homeless shelter and he slept in a field. It sustained him during predawn journeys to his Broward County, Fla., high school on three public buses.

"School became my stability," says Cardinale. "I was going to school and making progress toward graduation. It became part of my identity."

Homeless at age 14, Cardinale did more than just survive high school. He was an honor student who earned the rank of Eagle Scout and landed an internship at the *Orlando Sentinel.* Tulane University in New Orleans awarded him a full scholarship.

His odyssey from destitute teen to college graduate is remarkable, but Cardinale does not want his story used as an example of what homeless youth can do if they only try hard enough. He admits he often contemplated dropping out. School sometimes offered more roadblocks than help. "High school was not really designed for people in crisis," he says. "A bus ticket would have helped, and a more supportive principal."

One million children and youth are homeless in any given year, the Urban Institute estimates. Like Cardinale, some are runaways or throwaways—teens abandoned by their parents. Others are children staying with their parents in emergency shelters or doubled up with relatives or family friends. They sleep in weekly rate apartments or motels, campgrounds, or cars. They live on the streets, in alleys, under bridges.

For children in turmoil, school should be a place they can count on for stability. Too often, it is not. Too often, students who are without a home are also missing school. According to U.S. Department of Education statistics, 45 percent of homeless students in kindergarten through 12th grade were not attending school regularly during the time they were homeless, missing 15 or more days of school in a three-month period.

A number of school districts make extraordinary efforts to remove barriers for homeless students, while others do not.

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However, new federal regulations are prodding all districts to do more to identify and help some of their most vulnerable children.

"In a sea of chaos, school can be an anchor for these kids," says Diana Bowman, director of the National Center for Homeless Education in Greensboro, N.C. "When children talk about their experiences, more than anything, school is a bright spot. What happens to children who don't have this bright spot?"

The homeless are always with us

If you think you don't have homeless families in your district, you are probably mistaken. Homelessness may be more visible in big cities, but it not exclusively an urban problem: 21 percent of the nation's homeless live in the suburbs, and 9 percent live in rural areas or small towns.

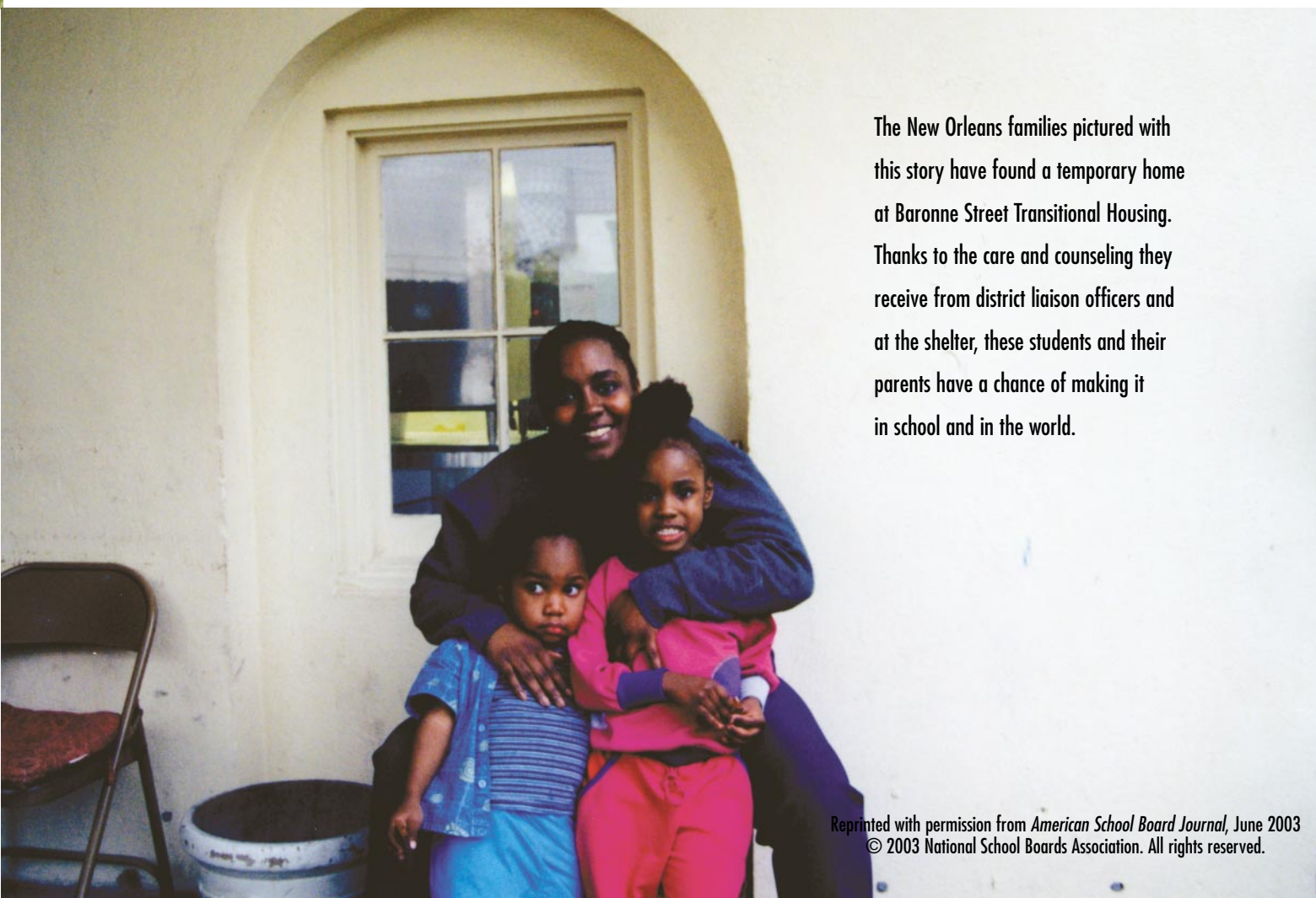
"It's common for people not to realize what homelessness is, and if you don't see it in your daily life, easy to think it doesn't exist. It's a problem that is hidden in many communities," says Patricia Julianelle, education staff attorney of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, in Washington, D.C.

The economic prosperity of the late 1990s did not eradicate homelessness. Jobs were plentiful, but housing prices and rents soared, making it difficult for workers earning minimum wage to afford apartments and houses. And the 1996 welfare reform laws left more women and their children out on the streets. The economic downturn in 2001 has made it even harder for poor families to get by.

As a result, the number of homeless families grew more rapidly in the past decade than the number of homeless individuals, according to Barbara Duffield, the director of education for the National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, D.C. Duffield worked with Congress on the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act. When the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2001, the decades-old McKinney-Vento Act was reauthorized with it. The law spells out specific responsibilities for schools, making it clear that the education of homeless students is the responsibility of every school district in the nation (see sidebar on p. 14). For the first time, the law does not limit the definition of homeless children to those living in emergency shelters, and it requires all districts—not just those that receive McKinney-Vento funds—to designate a staff person as a homeless liaison.

The changes in the law, Duffield says, reflect the growth of homeless families with children. The school liaison will be a catalyst for change, she hopes, and will convince schools that the new requirements are research-based strategies to raise academic achievement among the poorest and most vulnerable students.

The McKinney-Vento requirements may be new to some schools, but districts in large cities have been dealing with the



The New Orleans families pictured with this story have found a temporary home at Baronne Street Transitional Housing. Thanks to the care and counseling they receive from district liaison officers and at the shelter, these students and their parents have a chance of making it in school and in the world.

realities of homeless children and their families for years. The New Orleans Public Schools is such a district.

Homeless in New Orleans

It's a week before Mardi Gras, and Carnival season is in full swing. Already, some parades have lurched down Canal Street, krewe members on floats pelting onlookers with purple and gold beads, baubles, cups, and plush toys.

New Orleans is a study in extremes. It's a bountiful city, known for its overabundance of exquisite food and its decadence. But the Crescent City is also a place of crushing poverty, with an overstressed, undersupported public school system. Almost half the children in New Orleans live in poverty, and nearly 75 percent of the New Orleans Public Schools' 77,000 students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Like other tourist towns, the city attracts poor and unskilled workers with its warm weather and low-paying service jobs. But when those jobs dry up, as they have been doing over the past two years, families who have teetered on the brink of homelessness and poverty stop teetering and fall. The city's homeless population is estimated at 17,000 to 19,000—33 percent are families, mostly women and children.

In a ramshackle neighborhood off St. Charles Street seldom visited by tourists, homeless women and their families come to reclaim their lives. The Baronne Street Transitional Housing, a refurbished school building, is run by Catholic Charities. The mothers get counseling, find jobs, and learn to save money. Their children go to the neighborhood school or the one they attended before they become homeless. The New Orleans Public Schools give bus tokens to the children who want to stay at their home schools.

Most of the women who come to Baronne Street have few job skills, no high school diploma or even a GED. Grief and intergenerational poverty permeate their stories. Delores Stevens is raising her three grandchildren after her daughter stabbed and killed the children's father. Kandre Franklin, at 24, is the mother of six children. She's worried about her 7-year-old son, who brought a knife to school because kids were taunting him.

But the women say their children are content at Baronne Street. Jennifer Evans, who lives at Baronne with her 9-year-old daughter, says the living situation was hard at first. "I remember my daughter saying, 'I'm not getting out of the car—those girls walking down the street will know I live in the shelter.' I let her sit in the car." Now, however, she says, "Some of my

WHAT THE LAW REQUIRES

THE FEDERAL McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act became law in 1987 (when it was just McKinney). Over the years the law has been tweaked and modified with each reauthorization. Changes in the 2001 regulations include:

- Schools may not segregate homeless students.
- Students must be transported to and from the school they attended before they became homeless, if the parents request it.
- Students must be enrolled immediately, even if there is a dispute over which school they should attend.
- The decision on where to place a child must be made in the best interests of the child.
- School districts must designate a local liaison for homeless children and youth.

If states accept McKinney-Vento money (and all states do, but the District of Columbia does not), then all school districts in the states must follow the regulations.

One change drawing criticism from schools is the transportation requirement. Schools already hit hard by state budget shortfalls and torn by competing interests are balking at spending extra on transportation for homeless students. (One Massachusetts district had to add a new bus route, to the tune of $50,000.)

Gary Rutkin, federal program coordinator for McKinney-Vento, says the transportation requirement was designed as a strategy to improve academic achievement by reducing the number of school changes children must make. The regulations are flexible enough to allow for other, less-expensive solutions than providing a school bus. Money could be used for public transportation, for example, or schools could tap volunteer organizations.

A draft of the guidance for McKinney-Vento regulations may be found on the U.S. Department of Education's Web site: www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SASA/homelessguidance.doc.

A comprehensive resource on educating homeless children and McKinney-Vento is *Educating Children Without Housing: A Primer on the Legal Requirements and Implementation Strategies for Educators, Advocates, and Policymakers*, published by the American Bar Association. The book can be ordered online from the ABA's Web site: www.abanet.org/homeless/home.html.

Other resources can be found at these Web sites:

- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, www.naehcy.org.
- National Coalition for the Homeless, www.nationalhomeless.org.
- National Center for Homeless Education, www.serve.org/nche.
- National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, www.nlchp.org.—*K.V.*

daughter's friends call her here, so they know she lives here."

For most of these children, Baronne Street is unlike any place they've lived before. They get regular hot meals. The lights and heat are never shut off. The shelter's comfortable rooms and concerned adults represent stability they haven't experienced much in their young lives.

The homeless label is a stigma, but in the New Orleans Public Schools, where nearly all the children are disadvantaged, it doesn't sting as hard. As Michell Brown, Baronne Street's program director, puts it, "Most kids are in poverty; it's just a different form of poverty."

But children at the shelter have particular needs, she says. They need anger management counseling, which the shelter provides. They are behind in school because they've missed a lot of days. They don't trust people, and their socialization skills are low. "Kids don't come here because of any choices they made," she says.

District advocates for the homeless

If the children at Baronne Street have a chance of making it in school, it's no doubt due to the efforts of Sabrina Mays Montana and Laverne Dunn, the district's homeless liaisons.

The women are tireless advocates for homeless children and their parents. They connect families with social services and shelters, organize tutoring sessions at the shelters, and run a summer camp for homeless students and other disadvantaged students. The program serves more than 1,500 children and youth.

In addition to working with children and their families, Montana and Dunn educate school employees and the community about the realities of homeless families, trying to dispel the myths that homeless people are dirty, that they deserve to be homeless, that they don't love their children. "People feel [the homeless] are in that position because they want to be," says Dunn. "Children have no choice; they can't help it."

Those perceptions can be barriers to education for homeless children, as well, especially when so much rides on standardized test scores. School secretaries and principals have been known to fight the admission of homeless students by requiring their parents to show documentation that school officials know they don't have, such as utility bills or other proofs of address. "The assumption is that if they are homeless, they will have poor grades and poor attendance," says Montana. "We must educate them, no matter how low or high their test scores are."

In some cases, principals believe families aren't telling the truth about being homeless, because they're trying to get their children into schools outside their attendance area. Montana reminds them that the law says a child must be admitted immediately, even if there is a dispute. "We always tell principals who say, 'They are using us,' that if we find [parents] are using the program to get into a school, we do a home visit, then remove the child if necessary."

The women hope that understanding will foster compassion. Montana uses this example: A homeless boy recently faced expulsion because he brought a toy gun to school. The principal looked in the boy's knapsack and realized he was carrying everything he owned. His family had to be out of the shelter every day by 5 a.m. and take all of their possessions with them. The boy carried the toy gun because he believed he needed to protect his family in the shelter. "Ask why the person does what he's doing," Montana suggests. "Dig a little deeper to see the root."

Classroom teachers must know their children, says Montana. If children aren't doing homework or class projects, it might be because they don't have a quiet place to do their work at night. Some teachers require papers to be typed—an impossibility for a child living in a shelter.

Without advocates or resources, homeless students and their families are at the mercy of school secretaries, registrars, and administrators who may be ignorant of the new requirements of McKinney-Vento. Confusion also ensues when districts interpret the law in various ways—and sometimes the confusion ends in legal actions.

Abiding by the law

That was the case with the Chicago Public Schools. The city district now runs a program for homeless students that other schools in Illinois emulate, but it wasn't always that way. In fact, Laurene Heybach, head of the Law Project for the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, says Chicago's treatment of some homeless children in the early 1990s was "appalling." It was not unusual to encounter families who had been forced to switch schools five times, she says.

"Reducing mobility is one primary thing that a school can do to help itself. The course of practice was to keep moving kids out," says Heybach.

When Heybach and others went to shelters, they found children not attending school. Parents said the neighborhood school wouldn't enroll the children, and their old school wouldn't take them back. Other schools wouldn't take the children unless parents physically returned to their old schools to get records. "They were ridiculous situations that could have been resolved," Heybach says.

The lawyers approached the school system in 1992 to report the violations. When the system didn't respond, the coalition went to court with a class action suit and won in 1996. The school system still didn't respond, which forced the lawyers back into court, saying the district was in breach of their agreement. The appellate court agreed, issuing an injunction against the district in 1999.

It cost the Chicago Public Schools more than $1 million to litigate the case—only to be forced to do something it was legally obliged to do in the first place, Heybach says. But that lesson was lost on two districts in Maryland, as Laurie Norris found. A lawyer with Public Justice Center, a legal advocacy organization in Baltimore, Norris surveyed parents in several shelters in Prince George's County, Md. Three parents said their children weren't attending school because of transportation problems. Norris says she tried to work with the district before filing a class action suit, which the district lost. "Our role is to try to make sure that homeless children are paid attention to, that they aren't the last group on everyone's mind," says Norris.

But Norris wasn't done yet. In neighboring Montgomery County, Stephenie Bullock and her family lost their home and moved in with relatives in Washington, D.C. Montgomery County officials said that because the family was living with relatives in another school district, the children were not considered homeless and could not continue at their schools. Meanwhile, Washington school officials wouldn't let the children enroll because Bullock had no proof of residency in the district. The children were out of school the entire fall semester.

Bullock's oldest son, Brandon, found information about the McKinney-Vento Act on the Internet and sent a letter to Montgomery County school officials saying that it applied to him. Officials did not respond.

The family heard about Norris and contacted her. When Norris approached school officials, they said that because the family had been homeless for 10 months and not living in their district, they no longer had a right to go to school there. "I was flabbergasted," says Norris. "To the extent that they know about

McKinney, they are looking at it narrowly. They carved these kids out, for whatever reason."

At the heart of the disagreement was the new McKinney regulation identifying children living with relatives as homeless. Montgomery County officials said that since the Bullock family was in a stable living situation, the regulations did not apply.

A U.S. District Court judge disagreed, however, and decided that Montgomery County had to provide transportation for the children to return to their original schools. Brandon, who had missed nearly a year of classes, finished his senior year at his former high school.

The district's decision to argue its position in court did not mean that it sought to abdicate its responsibility to educate its homeless students, Montgomery County School Board President Patricia O'Neill says. In fact, she says, the system is full of principals and teachers who are always reaching out to homeless and transient children and families. "It's unfortunate that lawsuits like this create this impression that we are a cold-hearted system," she says.

These legal disputes would not surprise Devora Campbell. Campbell was recently appointed to the District 29 Community School Board in New York City, beating out nine other contenders for the seat. The position allows Campbell to advocate for homeless students. She's acutely aware of their needs—Campbell is homeless herself. The 40-year-old woman lives with her husband and two of her three children in a Queens family shelter. "Children in transition are in a lost civilization," she says.

Not all of them are lost, however. Across the country, school districts are serving and helping their homeless children. The ones meeting with the most success are those that reach out to the families as well as the children.

Help the family, help the child

Laura McBrien was teaching elementary school in California's Fresno Independent School District when school district officials asked her to develop a program for homeless students. That was six years ago, and the temporary assignment has grown into a full-time job. Over those years, Fresno's homeless program has become a national model—90 percent of homeless students graduate from high school, and 80 percent stay at the same school all year.

At first, McBrien knew nothing about homelessness. "I thought it wasn't in our own backyard," she says. "It was a real eye-opening experience. That's the thing—if you don't know about it, how can you do something about it?"

Fresno's philosophy for helping homeless students is to start by helping their family. "Problems at school stem from issues at home," says McBrien. "If you don't provide assistance to the whole family, you won't see improvement."

The fourth largest school system in California, Fresno enrolls 82,000 students. Some three-quarters live in poverty, and the area has a 15 percent unemployment rate. The first year of the homeless program, only 125 students were involved. But during the current school year, 3,398 students are being served through the program.

Once students and families are identified, a social worker connects them with social services and helps to move them into permanent housing. "A lot of our families can't deal with more than one issue at a time, and school isn't often on the top of the list," says McBrien. "We try to make it less of an issue by providing help, food, and clothing."

Another successful program that aims to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness is in central Pennsylvania. In the heart of rural Amish country, Lancaster is not a place normally associated with the homeless. But this small city hosts a variety of shelters, including the historic 100-year-old Water Street Rescue Mission, which are of such high quality that they draw homeless from all over the state.

The School District of Lancaster has about 11,400 students. The homeless program served about 900 students last year, a number that shocks people when program director Kenneth Marzinko talks to church groups and civic organizations.

A large network of charitable organizations and churches supports Lancaster's homeless program. These groups provide food and clothing, and they volunteer at an after-school program held twice a week. They shower the children with Christmas presents, and they provide the presents for the monthly parties held to celebrate the birthdays of all the children born that month.

"Our goal is to try and keep today's homeless students in school [so they will] graduate from high school, and go on to higher education so they can support their family," says Marzinko.

The power of possibilities

Matthew Cardinale graduated from Tulane University this spring with a degree in sociology. In the fall, he'll go to the University of California-Irvine to earn his master's degree in the same subject. He knows his life could have been very different without his intense belief in the redemptive power of education.

"I see learning as liberating and empowering," Cardinale says. Many of the young people he met at shelters and on the street had experiences in school that made them feel otherwise. "I had a stronger educational background so I had different ideas of what is possible," he says. "Certain homeless teens have lower ideas of what is possible."

But what is possible depends in part on what opportunities are available to young people. And when children and youth are denied access to school for whatever reason, their possibilities are dimmed.

"We are blessed to know what it's like to come home to a warm house, and we assume it's like that for everybody," says Montana, the New Orleans homeless liaison. "We are all part of mankind. We cannot be judgmental of each other. There is not enough time on earth to be like that."

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